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Osceola and Oskaloosa

It is a long way from the Everglades of Florida to the State of Iowa, but tales of heroism and romance travel quickly across the miles. So it was that Iowa settlers, as they sat about their fires on long winter evenings, wove legends about the heroic Seminole Indian, Osceola, and his beautiful wife, Oskaloosa, two Indians who lived in the Everglades and never set foot in Iowa. And so it was that these same settlers chose to name a town and a county after Osceola and a town for Oskaloosa.

Osceola was born in Georgia about 1800, almost fifty years before Iowa became a State. Although some authorities have contended that he was the son of a Creek woman and an English trader named Powell and there were also stories indicating that his mother was an escaped slave, it seems probable that he was of pure Indian blood, a handsome example of a typical "full-blooded and wild Indian". Possibly his mother remarried after his father's death, and her second husband may have been named Powell. At any rate, Osceola was frequently called Powell by the whites. His Indian name, "Osceola", has been said to

mean "Black Drink". One authority, however, points out that it may reasonably be translated "Rising Sun".

Little is known of Osceola's boyhood, but it is said that he fought against Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 and again in 1818. It is known that he was living near Fort King about 1832, visited the fort frequently, and was from time to time employed to restrain predatory Indians or to arrest deserters from the army. Although he had not been born to high rank, nor is there any record of his having been formally chosen chief, he gradually assumed a position of prominence among the Seminoles.

In October, 1834, the proud Osceola made his first appearance in the public affairs of his nation when he addressed a group of chiefs at a council at Fort King. He spoke regarding the treaty of Payne's Landing, which had been made in 1832. Osceola passionately opposed this treaty because it required the removal of the Seminoles from Florida and he voiced his disapproval in these words:

"My Brothers! The white people got some of our chiefs to sign a paper to give our lands to them; but our chiefs did not do as we told them to do. They did wrong; we must do right. The agent tells us we must go away from the lands which

we live on, our homes, and the graves of our fathers, and go over the big river [the Mississippi] among bad Indians. When the agent tells me to go from my home, I hate him; because I love my home and will not go from it."

Following this declaration Osceola became one of the outstanding Indian leaders in the Seminoles' fight against removal from Florida. Wiley Thompson, the government agent at Fort King, referred to him as "one of the most bold, daring, and intrepid chiefs of the Nation, and one who has been more hostile to emigration and has thrown more embarrassments in my way than any other".

The next year, in 1835, Osceola was present at another meeting called by Thompson. Again the government agent was trying to persuade the chiefs to acknowledge the treaty of Payne's Landing. Most of the chiefs contented themselves with a silent refusal to touch the pen to such an instrument, but Osceola is reported to have plunged his knife into the paper with a dramatic gesture of defiance, saying, "This is the only way I will sign!" As punishment for his independent arrogance Osceola was seized and put in irons. After several days he feigned a change of heart and was released, with the understanding that he would use his influence in favor of the immediate emigration of the Seminoles.

Instead, he gathered the Indian forces of the opposition and on December 28, 1835, ambushed and murdered Thompson and several of his companions, including Charley Emathla, a chief who was agreeable to the removal of the Seminoles from Florida. This act of violence precipitated the Second Seminole War, a war in which Osceola's skill and daring carried him to a position of authentic leadership. He hid the women, children, and old men of his tribe in the depths of a great swamp where the white troops were unable to find them for a long time. Then Osceola and his warriors turned to the work of harassing the white army. In this he was so successful that he outmaneuvered the United States forces and aroused public criticism of the army and its leader, General Thomas S. Jesup.

Jesup, angered by the public cry for more energetic action and somewhat nettled by Osceola's successes, violated the flag of truce in October, 1837, and ordered Osceola to be seized when he came to Fort Peyton for an interview. Many citizens condemned this act of "inexcusable treachery" and sympathized with the captured Indian warrior.

Following his capture, Osceola was taken to Fort Marion at Saint Augustine and was later removed to Fort Moultrie near Charleston, South

Carolina. While at Fort Moultrie he scorned a chance to escape with two of his companions saying, "I have done nothing to be ashamed of; it is for those to feel shame who entrapped me." The imprisoned Osceola continued to brood over the wrongs inflicted upon him and his people until his death in January, 1838, of a throat infection. According to the story, he died wearing his war regalia, in accordance with the irrevocable oath of war and destruction which he had taken.

Osceola's grave, surrounded by a small iron fence, remains today just inside the entrance at Fort Moultrie. Words on the simple white stone marker read:

OSCEOLA, PATRIOT AND WARRIOR
DIED AT FORT MOULTRIE
JANUARY 30, 1838.

Following Osceola's unjust treatment at the hands of the white man, many pioneer settlers chose to pay tribute to his memory by naming counties and towns after him. Today in the United States there are three counties and fourteen towns which bear the name of Osceola.

In Johnson County, Iowa, in 1837 and 1838, there were two rival county seats on paper. One was Napoleon and the other was Osceola. The latter, backed by Pleasant Harris, a native of Indiana, was carefully laid off — on paper — with

lots for churches, colleges, parks, and a courthouse, but it never had any defined location. During the winter of 1837-1838 (the winter of Osceola's death) the rivalry between the imaginary towns of Napoleon and Osceola was a lively topic for conversation among the settlers. One would-be poet even broke out in verse with an "Ode to Osceola" and "Napoleon's Reply". In a serio-sarcastic tone the "Ode" ran thus:

The mighty chief whose deeds so brave,
Whose hate so deadly to each foe,
Has late been summoned to the grave;
The warrior's head now lies full low.

* * * * *

We'll build a city to his name —
With church and stately tower adorn;
High as the heavens shall reach its fame,
And in it none shall hunger, thirst or mourn.

But even poetry could not win the contest for Osceola; Napoleon was selected as the county seat only to lose that position of honor in December, 1839, when an "Act to Relocate the Seat of Justice of the County of Johnson" was passed by the territorial legislature and the county seat was moved to Iowa City. Thus the town of Osceola in Johnson County was never actually a town.

A little more than ten years later, Dickinson Webster, a well-known pioneer of Clarke County,

who strongly condemned the treatment of Osceola, suggested naming the seat of government in Clarke County after the Indian. So it was that in 1851 the Iowa town of Osceola was named.

Iowa's Osceola County, located in northwestern Iowa, was not organized until 1872. The details concerning its naming seem to have been lost, but the fact that it was called Osceola seems to be good evidence that the heroic deeds of the Seminole chief were still admired thirty-four years after his death. One account regarding the naming of the county contained the comment that Osceola "is quite a pleasant sounding name and old settlers who still survive, whether living in the county or elsewhere, have learned to love the sound of the word".

Iowans also liked the musical name attributed to one of Osceola's wives. Facts about the life of this Indian heroine seem to be almost non-existent but legends and traditions are numerous. According to one story, the Seminoles captured a Creek princess and Osceola decided to make her his wife, giving her the euphonious name "Ouscaloosa" — "the most beautiful one" or "the last of the beautiful".

There is proof that Osceola had at least two wives, for an eye-witness account of his death mentions their presence, but their names are not

given. One wife, it is said, was named Che-cho-ter, "the morning dew". Peoka is also given as the name of one of Osceola's wives. There is also a tradition that Osceola had a part-Negro wife, who was seized as the daughter of a slave mother and made a slave. Kenneth W. Porter, who has made a study of this story, says of the name Oskaloosa, "The word is, without much doubt, Muskogee. . . . *Oski* means 'rain' and *lusta*, frequently contracted or corrupted to *lusa*, means 'black'. Tuscaloosa means Black Warrior, for example. So Oskaloosa might well mean Black Rain. Perhaps this is Osceola's supposedly part-Negro wife! — an appropriate name, certainly."

The origin of Oskaloosa's name may, however, be due to fiction, rather than to fact. A romance entitled *Osceola; or, Fact and Fiction*, was published in 1838. The author [James B. Ransom], designated on the title page only as "A Southerner", made Ouskaloosa the favorite wife of the hero and described her as the "last of the Uchee". Apparently these stories and names, mixing fact and fiction, appealed to the pioneers who were realistic about Indians nearby but romantic in their attitude toward the victims of oppression at a distance.

When Mahaska County was organized in 1844,

the county commissioners had difficulty in deciding whether to call the county seat Mahaska or Ouscaloosa. In a vote taken among the bystanders the latter name won out, and the town of Ouscaloosa was organized. The present spelling is a result of the original recording of the town by a clerk who guessed at its orthography. And so it was that the musical name of an Indian woman in Florida was given to an Iowa town.

George W. Seevers paid tribute to Oskaloosa and the town of Oskaloosa in a poem which he wrote for the *Oskaloosa Herald* in 1853:

Oskaloosa! Oskaloosa!
What a beauteous name;
Who'd have thought a wee papoose
Ever bore the same?
Once it was an Indian baby,
Then a chieftain's mate;
Now a city, next it may be
Capital of state.

A village known as Oskaloosa Junction also existed in Mahaska County for a time and a post office by that name, at or near the present town of Beacon, was recorded in 1866, but it has long since been abandoned. Like her famous husband, Ouscaloosa or Ouskaloosa has been honored by several other States. Illinois, Kansas, and Missouri, as well as Iowa, have their Oskaloosas.

"What's in a name?", asked Shakespeare. In Osceola and Oskaloosa there are tragedy and romance, history and fiction, music and the echoes of injustice. But for these names, what Iowan would think of an Indian in Florida, who died in prison because he loved his home country, or recall the legends woven about the name of Oskaloosa?

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